

Essay 2: Gendered “Others”: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism

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The concepts of fixed gender systems and sexuality identifies as we know them in the Western world are socially constructed and culturally relevant. Cross culturally we can see and interpret what Western cultures would describe as alternative gender systems. Gender systems that encompass third and fourth gender categories that expand within the male and female binary systems. Analyzing these diverse gender systems as individual cultural experiences allow us to understand the historical sociopolitical context in which they were constructed. Western comprehension of gender and sexuality promotes the concept of sexual dimorphism, leaving everything else out as irregular or abnormal, while in turn disregarding individual cross-cultural experiences. The Fausto-Sterling, Halperin, and Herdt articles emphasize the importance in distinguishing how the concepts of gender and sexuality are conceptualized and experienced cross-culturally.

In European and Western societies the concept of a gender/sex dualism systems, male and female, has been widely accepted and regarded as the only genders/sexes that existed. The concept of gender and sex binaries played into doctor's and biologists understanding of sex, genitalia, and reproduction. It became a fixed belief that there were only two biological sexes that corresponded to two genders. In her article *Sexing The Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* Brown University professor Anne Fausto-Sterling, a leading expert in both biology and gender development, describes how the relationship that the biological sciences has had with defining and understanding multi gender and sex systems. A relationship that in western societies, begins when a human is born. Fausto-Sterling writes, "Choosing which criteria to use in determining sex, and choosing to make the determination at all, are social decisions for which scientists can offer no absolute guidelines." (Fausto-Sterling, pg 5) This means that even

doctors and scientists, people who rely on what biology and experiments can tell them, are still subject to socially constructed concepts and inherently reinforce them when assigning gender at birth. An example of this is seen in the way intersex individuals receive a lack of recognition and validation across scientific and social communities. She writes, that within a society of normalization, “medical practitioners, progress in the handling of intersexuality involves maintaining the normal.” (Fausto-Sterling, pg 8) The normal pertaining to preserving the sex dualism systems and therefore altering intersex bodies to fit either the male sex or female sex categories. This practice is detrimental in negatively shaping an individual's life because it invalidates their unique lived existence and experience while essentially erases them from what is believed to be fixed binary gender and sex categories.

Binary gender and sex systems are not universal constructed and shared concept. While it is known amongst scholars, that third and fourth gender and sex systems exist cross-culturally, their initial discovery as a flaw of western sexual dimorphism is often overlooked. Before understanding these systems as unique and culturally significant experiences, early historians and anthropologists saw them as nothing more than an abnormal falter in their perceived normal dualism systems. Gilbert Herdt a professor of human sexuality studies and anthropology at San Francisco State University explains early encounters with third and fourth gender systems in his article *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*. On page 24 Herdt explains how these early encounters highlighted the approving/disapproving attitude of the practicing historian/anthropologist who came across these cultures as well as understanding what was being portrayed as a deviant condition. This means that in some communities where third sex and third and fourth gender was accepted, there was still evidence of individuals, such as the

berdache, hermaphrodites, women dressing in men's clothes, seeking to engage in the act of "passing." This passing refers to a seemingly social deviant individual attempting to personify and conform to the traits of the normative masculine or feminine versions, while in turn creating niche categories within their societies. Herdt also writes in his article about the connections historians and anthropologists find between Darwinism and modernism, and how social deviants outside of the sexual dualism systems challenged these notions. Darwinism pushed for emphasizing the role of nature vs what was deemed natural. With heterosexuality and the process of reproduction between a male and female was deemed not only a product of nature, but "the teleologically necessary and highest form of sexual evolution." (Herdt, pg 28) That the function of having only two genders within all realms of nature existed to fulfill the basic function of survival.

Along with the concepts of categorizing sex and gender, the implication of sexuality as an identity has also been socially constructed and is culturally significant. In his article *Is There a History of Sexuality*, American gender studies and queer theorist and professor at University of Michigan David M. Halperin writes about the brief history that the learned concept of sexuality has. Focusing on its influences cross-culturally, and the process it took in help creating the concept of sexual identity. Halperin first explains that when learning about the history of sexuality it is difficult for individuals to disconnect learned practices and associations within the modern world from the ancient world, calling it, "The supposed universality of "human nature." (Halperin, pg 258) This infers that cross-culturally and throughout time people have universally correlated sexual behaviors, sexual desires, and kinships ties interchangeably while also attributing the same accepted and learned significance, an idea we know to be false. An

example of this is understanding the way Athenian people viewed sex behaviors as an act through which emphasis was put on social and political ranking rather than a formal and fixed desire and identity to have sex with specific genders and people. Halperin does not discount the notion that individuals engaging in Athenian sex behaviors were expressing internal desires, He explains how they were shaped differently than the way western society has shaped sexual desire. They were desires, “Shaped by the shared cultural definition of sex as an activity that generally occurred only between a citizen and a non-citizen.” (Halperin, pg 261) This again highlights the fact that different cultures have conceptualized sex behaviors, desires, and sexual identities differently and independently of each other.

Within the context of a Western society, what we regard as “normal” about sex, gender, and sexuality is that they are shaped within fixed binary and dualistic systems. There are only two biological sexes male and female, two genres boy and girl that correspond to biological sex traits, and heterosexuality transcribed around the process of reproduction. All individuals that have fallen outside of these roles are portrayed as deviant, unnatural, abnormal, and universally not accepted and recognized as real. Modern anthropologists, historians, and scholars actively look cross-culturally to validate lived experiences and normalize the existence of individuals and communities that fall and identify outside of Western social constructs. We must remember to observe and treat culture’s learned and practiced sex, gender, and sexuality concepts as individual circumstances and not another version of Western theories and ideas.